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Trying to Bury a Hatchet

The Reagan Administration did its best last week to suggest that the changing of the guard in the Kremlin was an opportunity for the superpowers to thaw their frigid relations. After his meeting with Konstantin Chernenko, Vice President George Bush declared that the two men had agreed on the need "to place our relationship upon a more constructive path." He added, "The mood was good, the spirit was excellent. It signals that we can go from there."

Chernenko was considerably less ebullient. In his debut as General Secretary, he stressed the Soviet Union's determination to maintain its military strength and denounced Western leaders for their "reckless actions" that threaten the strategic balance. But American officials chose to stress that Chernenko had refrained from singling out the U.S. or Ronald Reagan by name and that he had reiterated the Soviet Union's preference for solving international disputes by negotiation.

Even before Yuri Andropov's death, Reagan had unilaterally declared a cease-fire in the war of words. In a TIME interview on Jan. 2, Reagan vowed that he would not use phrases like "focus of evil" in reference to the U.S.S.R. again. On Jan. 16, he gave a speech conjuring up the image of a folksy get-together among Jim and Sally and Ivan and Anya, who quickly bridge the ideological divide between their governments. The Soviet leader made fun of Reagan's rhetorical tactics and challenged him to match his "speeches" with "practical deeds." Nonetheless, the Soviets began to mute their rhetoric somewhat. The Soviet press stopped portraying the President as a new Hitler, and leaders backed away from Andropov's statement of Sept. 28 suggesting that the Kremlin had abandoned any hope of doing business with the Reagan Administration.

But it is highly questionable whether the Kremlin or, for that matter, the Administration has either the will or the way to effect a major turn-around, particularly in the most important area: the pursuit of a nuclear-arms-control agreement in the coming months. In response to the initial deployment of U.S. missiles in Western Europe at the end of last year, the Soviets walked out of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) negotiations and broke off the parallel Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) in Geneva.

Getting the negotiators back to the table will be difficult enough; reaching any agreement will be even more so. Progress in arms control has always depended on a degree of civility and a broader context of cooperation, or at least jointly regulated rivalry, between the superpowers. Reestablishing those conditions for productive diplomacy will be time consuming.

SHALNEV—TASS FROM SOVFOTO

The President, facing a portrait of Andropov, signs the condolence book in the Soviet embassy

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Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a former aide of Henry Kissinger's who is now at the Brookings Institution, believes that the core questions of nuclear-arms control will have to await a number of other developments. Before it would be prudent for the U.S. to make any adjustments in its negotiating positions in INF or START, he says, the Soviets will have to show flexibility in the talks between NATO and the Warsaw Pact on conventional forces that are due to resume in Vienna next month. They should agree to "confidence-building measures," like the ongoing negotiations over upgrading the Moscow-Washington hot line. In addition, says Sonnenfeldt, the Soviets will have to show their willingness to reduce international tensions and avoid the temptation to seek advantages at U.S. expense in the Third World.

Sonnenfeldt expects Reagan's visit to China in April to give the Kremlin an added incentive to seek better ties with the U.S. Since Richard Nixon's trip to China in 1972, the U.S. has had more leverage with Moscow when Washington's connection with Peking was strong. But partly because of the Reagan Administration's early arms sales to Taiwan, the Sino-American leg of the triangular relationship has been shaky.

Even if the tone of U.S.-Soviet relations continues to improve, it will be difficult to resume productive arms-control negotiations. One obstacle is very much of the Soviets' making. They justified their walkout, and have set conditions for their return that are not acceptable to the alliance: that the U.S. agree to withdraw from Europe the nine Pershing II and 32 cruise missiles that were deployed last December.

Since Andropov's death, some Soviets have privately hinted that a freeze on the further installation of new U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe (a total of 572 are scheduled to be deployed by the end of 1988) might help get talks going again. But Reagan ruled that out last week. A moratorium, he said, "would be a retreat, and it would not do anything to speed up negotiations if we now fell back and delayed deploying."

In START, the obstacles are more of the Administration's making. From the beginning of the talks in 1982, the U.S. has demanded massive and unrealistic reductions in the Soviet Union's arsenal of land-based nuclear weapons. Last fall some of Secretary of State George Shultz's aides designed a new initiative that might be more acceptable to the Soviets. To minimize the appearance that the Administration was changing course, State Department officials explained that their so-called framework approach was nothing more than an elaboration of the Administration's existing START proposal.

In fact, it would be a dramatic return to more traditional approaches in arms control. The framework borrows heavily

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